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A historical framing analysis of liberalism in the U.S. Press (1978-2002)

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Abstract

While roughly half of American citizens continue to claim allegiance to the Democratic Party, there is a widely-held belief that 'liberalism' itself has seen a strong ideological denigration. This research examined 586 articles from newspapers (*Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*), predominant newsmagazines (*Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*) and ideologically-focused newsmagazines (*The Nation* and *National Review*) from 1978 to 2002 to determine if this ideological denigration exists in the press. It was found that liberalism was less likely to be framed positively than negatively in media coverage and was significantly less likely to be associated with positive attributes, such as humanitarianism, egalitarianism and democratic beliefs than with negative attributes, such as regulation, permissiveness, prodénte beliefs, multinationalism and centralism. It is suggested that the impact of this shift could be having profound impact on policy, ideological identification and the range of permissable debate available in our present American democracy. Further, such bias in coverage complicates the notion of an objective press.

Present Status of Knowledge

Liberalism

The term 'liberal' is defined by Collins Concise English dictionary as:

Liberal: adj. 1. relating to or having social and political views that favor progress and reform. 2. relating to or having policies or views advocating individual freedom. 3. giving and generous in temperament or behavior. 4. tolerant of other people.

Early use of the term 'liberal' was reserved for scholars who were well versed in many areas of the broadly defined academic area of liberal arts (Johnson, 2002). This early use of 'liberal' eventually evolved into political affairs and for hundreds of years the term carried with it a certain sense of political esteem. Since the eighteenth century, liberality has been a central force in the political spectrum of the United States and has had a profound influence on the founding of the U.S. government (Hamburger, 2000). As recently as 30 years ago liberalism was associated with the idealism of leaders such as Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Further, populist movements that fought for the introduction of a 40-hour work week (Denning, 1997), the end the Vietnam War (Gitlin, 1980) and equal rights legislation for African-Americans (Riches, 1997) and women (Sargent, 1981) were spearheaded by liberal ideologies (Roszak, 1998).

Yet, in 2003, both sides of a divided American political spectrum seem to have concluded that the term 'liberal' is itself contentiously problematic. Conservative talk radio pundits such as Rush Limbaugh, Cal Thomas and Don Imus are no longer the only forces actively critiquing liberalism. While roughly half of American citizens claim allegiance to the Democratic Party, even former President Clinton made great efforts to place himself ideologically right of 'liberals' when he repeatedly proclaimed himself a staunch 'moderate' during his two democratic elections. In 1988, *The New York Times* reported that "[Dukakis] asserted last week that the 'L word' of his own candidacy was not 'liberal' but 'leadership' – in a reference to President Reagan's criticism of the Massachusetts Governor as 'liberal, liberal, liberal'" (Boyd, 1988). In the same year, another *New York Times* article read, "for today's politicians, being branded with the 'L' word is seen to be as disfiguring as the scarlet 'A' that Hester Prynne had to bear upon her breast" (Haufler, 1988). Fifteen

years later, the stigma of liberalism appears to have remained. In 2003, Howard Dean, a frontrunner in the Democratic Presidential primaries told an Arizona crowd that Democrats have voted for Bush policies because “we're afraid of being too liberal” (Fischer, 2003). One United Press International headline for Senator Joe Lieberman, another Democratic candidate in the 2004 election, read: “Lieberman lashes out against liberal Dems” (“Lieberman lashes out,” August 10).

In a related ideological shift, negative charges that the media has a liberal bias have also increased in recent years. Forty-three percent of randomly sampled adults in 1996 believed the news media have a liberal bias – this number was up from 12 percent just eight years earlier in 1988 (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999). In 1996, Republican candidate Bob Dole blamed the news media in general, and *The New York Times* in particular, for favoring his democratic opponent, Bill Clinton (Kurtz, 1996). Four years earlier in 1992, the Republican Party was seemingly so confident of the public belief that the media was liberal that they created a campaign slogan for George Bush's re-election campaign that read: “Annoy the Media: Re-elect George Bush.”

All of these charges of liberal bias in the news exist despite research demonstrating that the reverse is actually true. In a thorough content analysis, researchers found bias in the news and editorial positions of a CBS affiliate owned by *The New York Times* in both time of coverage and direction of favorability toward the Reagan-Bush campaign of 1984 (Smith & Roden, 1988). Other research examining a broad base of newspaper and broadcast content found that during the 1988, 1992 and 1996 Presidential campaigns, criticisms of a liberal bias from conservative elites surfaced after periods when journalists actually treated the Republican candidate relatively positively (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999).

A complication of recent shifts in liberal ideology is that there have been no marked changes in party loyalty to either the Democratic, Republican or Independent party in the last twenty years (Domke et. al, 1999). This has continued from World War II until the mid-eighties despite the argument that America has generally moved toward a more liberal ideology as a whole (Smith, 1990). It appears Americans may have increasingly ascribed to a more liberal ideology over the last half-century, even though they may not use the term ‘liberal’ in describing themselves. Yet, it should

be said that more recently there has been a growing conservative mood in America (Stimson, 1999). Regardless of these ideological transformations, it is important to note that not much has changed since the landmark 1960 University of Michigan study, which found that only 2 percent of the public were able to be classified as holding a consistently "ideological" position on overall policy (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960). Fully 98 percent of respondents were "liberal" on some issues and "conservative" on others. Indeed, the degree to which an individual will define themselves in ideological labels depends almost entirely on an intense political interest, expertise (Judd & Krosnick, 1989), educational attainment or level of political conceptualization (Jacoby, 1991).

Those who actively identify with sharply delineated ideological labels are very small, according to Schiffer (2000). The larger public associates meaning to these identifiers symbolically (Conover & Feldman, 1981) and feels the "relative" esteem of elite ideological conventions (Schiffer, 2000). This is because those who may only be fairly sophisticated in terms of their political knowledge are still adequately exposed to elite conceptions of political ideology but lack the abundance of prior considerations necessary to deter elite persuasion (Zaller, 1992).

Schiffer (2000) argues, "it is certainly plausible, given the high salience of ideological labels in elite discourse since the Reagan era, that the middle-dwellers have been exposed to enough of the one-sided information flow to be persuaded by it" (299). It has been suggested that the increased charge of a 'liberal' bias in media and a general disdain of 'liberal ideology' in media content is due to individuals "taking cues" from conservative elites (Watts, Domke, Shah & Fan, 1999). Given this previous research suggesting a transference of "relative" esteem from political elites to the broader public concerning ideological identification, the denouncement of liberalism in the popular press could have profound implications on policy, political identification and the range of ideological debate available in American democracy.

There is widespread belief that the denigration of the 'L' word began during Reagan's era, although no systematic study exists that examines the origins of this phenomenon (Schiffer, 2000). Thus, while the implications of this ideological shift may be profound, the origin of anti-liberalism in

the media and the types of narrative constructions used to define liberalism in the press have not been explained.

Theoretical Framework

News and information must be categorized if any meaningful comprehension and communication is to take place. News, like any other communication system, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings. Otherwise stated, “news and information has no intrinsic value unless embedded in a meaningful context which organizes and lends it coherence” (London, 1993, 1). The ‘meaningful context’ is the frame that shapes a news story (Entman, 1993). While sometimes difficult to ascertain on an initial reading, frames purport to view an issue through a macro lens by examining the central theme of an issue. Gitlin (1980) has defined frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse” (7). Hertog and McLeod (1995) state that “the frame used [for interpretation] determines what available information is relevant”(4). Thus, the frames of a story determine the relevant pieces of descriptive information that attaches to that concept. It is from this perspective that the term ‘liberal’ will be examined in media content.

All articles will be analyzed in accordance with earlier framing studies (i.e. Entman, 1993), which search for general themes after examining the article as a whole. After a thorough examination of existing literature on liberalism, Smith’s (1990) detailed deconstruction of liberal attributes still appear to be the most inclusive and concise. This is a testament to his thoughtfulness, as even by his accounts, liberalism is a “chimera” that continuously changes its emphasis over time. Given that creating a comprehensive definition for liberalism is an extremely difficult task, his catalogue of attributes will be used when coding news content for this research.

According to Smith (1990), liberalism is associated with reformism, democratic beliefs, libertarianism, regulation and interventionism, centralism, humanitarianism, egalitarianism, permissiveness, internationalism, multinationalism, nonmilitarianism and prodénte beliefs. He divides the first eight attributes as pertaining to domestic issues while the last four pertain to international

situations. The reformist attribute is defined as opting for change and generally opposed to the status quo, while democratic beliefs are rooted in favoring a full extension of electoral rights. The libertarian attribute is defined as supporting civil liberties, such as free speech and the right to protest. The regulatory and interventionist attribute is seen as backing the management of business and the economy by the government. The centralist attribute describes when the federal government is used to set and enforce national standards and regulate state and local governments. The humanitarian attribute is seen as favoring a social welfare system for the care and protection of society in general and the lower class in particular. The egalitarian attribute is defined as advocating equal treatment for all, and perhaps, equal conditions for all. The permissiveness attribute suggests tolerating and often approving of nontraditional life styles and practices, such as homosexuality, nudity and drug use.

The final four attributes, first created by Smith (1990), are associated with liberalism on an international scale. The internationalist attribute is defined as supporting active U.S. involvement in the world, while the multinational attribute is seen to be backing the United Nations and other collective efforts. The nonmilitarist attribute is when nonmilitary solutions are preferred to international disputes and finally, the prodémocrat believes in good relations with Communist nations and does not emphasize anti-Communism as a cornerstone of foreign policy.

Each of the twelve attributes' valence was tested in an Introduction to Mass Communication course to ascertain whether people felt the terms were generally "positive", "negative", or "neither positive nor negative." Students were not told that these terms have been associated with liberalism. It was found that the following attributes were seen as generally "positive": humanitarian (97.6 percent), egalitarian (96.3 percent), and democratic (71.8 percent). Reformist (64.2 percent), libertarian (74.8 percent), internationalist (46.8 percent) and nonmilitarist (42.6 percent) were seen as "neither positive nor negative." The following attributes were seen as "negative": regulatory and interventionist (78.4 percent), permissive (72.9 percent), prodémocrat (68.4 percent), multinational (59.8 percent) and centralist (48.7 percent).

Through the exploration of these twelve attributes of liberalism and of liberalism itself, this research aims to discover if there truly is an anti-liberal ideology in press coverage. The found constructions of liberalism will also be juxtaposed against other media in accordance with previous intermedia research (i.e. Boyle, 2001), which explores how different media cover issues in divergent ways. If an anti-liberal ideology is found in the media, what publication did it originate from? Which publications continued to purport an anti-liberal ideology over time? Has coverage of liberalism shifted over the last 24 years? It is to these questions that this study now turns.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are offered to test the widespread assumption that liberalism has become an increasingly more contested word in the American political landscape:

H1: Liberalism will be less likely to be framed positively than negatively in media coverage.

H2: Liberalism will be significantly less likely to be associated with the positive attributes (humanitarian, egalitarian, democratic) than the negative attributes (regulatory and interventionist, permissiveness, prodénte, multinationalism, and centralism) in media content.

H3: The ideologically-conservative magazine, *National Review*, as well as the generally perceived conservative newsmagazine, *U.S. News & World Report*, will be significantly less likely than *Newsweek*, and *The Nation* to frame liberalism and its associated “positive” attributes positively.

H4: Due to the ‘norm’ of objectivity, newspaper editorials and newspaper articles will be significantly less likely to frame liberalism and its associated attributes positively or negatively than to frame liberalism as “neither positive nor negative” or “both positive and negative”.

H5: Republican/conservative political organizations and governmental representatives will be significantly less likely than Democratic/liberal political organizations and governmental representatives to frame liberalism and “positive” liberal attributes positively.

H6: Media coverage of liberalism and of “positive” liberal attributes will be significantly less likely to be portrayed increasingly positive than increasingly negative over the 24-year sample period.

Method

This research analyzed news media content and opinion pieces over the last twenty-four years from 1978 to 2002 (beginning two years before Reagan took office) with the root-word “liberal” in the headline or lead paragraph of an article. The 4 large-circulation newspapers, 2 predominant newsmagazines and 2 ideologically-focused magazines were chosen randomly from a comprehensive list created by first compiling an index of all newspapers and magazines available in on-line search indexes. In several cases, the on-line databases only went back as far as 1980 or 1982. For those years, a paper database was used and hard-copies were found through a university subscription library. For the remaining years, the LexisNexis database was used for *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *The New York Times*, while InfoTrack was used for *National Review* and *The Nation*. The ProQuest on-line database was used for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Chicago Tribune*.

In examining newspapers, only those with circulations over 200,000 with content available from the entire 24-year sample period were included for consideration. This resulted in 21 newspapers, which were further divided into three geographic regions (west coast, the midwest and east coast). *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Wall Street Journal* were examined in an effort to analyze content from major, geographically and somewhat ideologically diverse newspapers. Given that the *Wall Street Journal* (daily circulation 1,800,607) primarily covers U.S. and international business and financial news and is owned by Dow Jones & Company, many view the paper as conservative (Wikipedia, 2004a), due to its focus on business. Conversely, the *New York Times* (daily circulation 1,132,000) has long fought off charges of its liberal bias, particularly on social issues (Wikipedia, 2004b). Conservative critics cite the newspapers' inclusion of gay and lesbian couples in the 'Wedding Announcement' section and the continual barbs directed at social conservatives from A.O. Scott's film reviews. However, newspapers, unlike magazines, still often are free of ideological labels because of the “norm of objectivity” that is a guiding principle of news reporting.

In addition, the purposeful inclusion of *The New York Times* was beneficial to give a fuller barometer of what all Americans were reading due to the powerful influence that *The New York Times* has on other papers throughout the country (Dreier, 1982; Gans, 1979; Reese & Danielian, 1989; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991).

The final two newspapers, *Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times* were selected because they both stand as the leading newspapers in their geographic region outside of the east coast (where the other two newspapers used in this study are located). *The Chicago Tribune*, self-styled as the “World’s Greatest Newspaper”, is the leading newspaper in the Midwest and the *Los Angeles Times* has a daily subscription rate of 965,633 readers. Like all newspapers around the world, there are certainly charges of “liberal” and “conservative” bias leveled at these two newspapers as well. However, these charges have not been sustained over time or to such a degree that any purported ideological divisions can be used as a categorization for this study.

Two predominant newsmagazines, *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report*, were included in the content analysis as well to determine if any differences existed between newspaper and newsmagazine content and between the newsmagazines themselves. The two predominant newsmagazines were selected based on circulation and availability as well as perceived political ideology. The three major newsmagazines in the United States, based on circulation are *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*. An index of *Time* for the entire sample period was not available. However, in purposefully seeking a balanced political sample, *Newsweek* is generally regarded as being “slightly liberal” while “*U.S. News* is unabashedly conservative” (Wikipedia, 2004c).

Finally, magazines targeted toward specific political ideologies were also examined to determine if any shift in liberalism principally emanated from their pages. The two ideologically-focused magazines, *The Nation* and *National Review* were selected based on availability for the entire sample period and their widely-accepted political positioning as being respectively liberal and conservative. All articles in newspapers, predominate magazines and ideologically-focused

magazines were separated into editorial and news categories. This was done to see if any found shifts in the use of liberalism emanated from one of these two sources.

The article was the unit of analysis. The goal was to collect four newspaper news articles and four newspaper editorial articles from each year sampled with the root-word “liberal” in the headline or first paragraph. The aim for all of the magazines was two news articles and two editorial articles for each sample year, however *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* had no article-type distinction listed in their indexes. Therefore, if possible, four news articles and four editorial articles were selected from the ideologically-focused magazines and four general articles were selected from the two predominant news magazines for each year sampled.

To ensure a random sample, the total pool of articles found was divided for four when randomly selecting the final articles to be examined. For example, if 36 news articles were found in a given year with the term “liberal” in the headline or first paragraph, every 9th article (36 divided by 4) was randomly chosen for inclusion in the final study. If less than four articles were available in a given year, then all of the articles were examined.

Coding

Two graduate students were separately trained in the coding procedure but were not informed as to the scope of the project. Both coders were given examples of different value selections within each of the possible variables and ample discussion ensued to ensure that coders were completely knowledgeable as to the scope of the coding. Each article was first broadly coded for the valence of the term liberal itself (positive, negative, both positive and negative, or neither). Coders were also asked if the term ‘liberal’ was associated with a person or group, political party, ideology, social program, economic plan or ‘other’ in the article. These options were created after first examining several articles to locate a reasonable range of possible categories. It was possible to code three of these associations with the term liberal.

If the term liberal was associated with a person, coders determined the person was mainly described as a member of a political organization, a government representative, a person not

affiliated with any organization, a think tank representative, an editorial columnist, a news reporter or 'other.' In examining the associated persons, coders were asked to categorize political organizations, governmental positions and think tanks as Democratic/liberal, Republican/conservative, other or unknown/unstated. Some examples of Democratic/liberal political organizations given to coders were Campaign for America's Future, People for the American Way, and Americans for Democratic Action. A few of the Republican/conservative political organizations given to the coders as examples were Family Research Council, James Madison Project, and American Values. Governmental positions were coded in the obvious categorizations of Democrat, Republican, other or unknown. Examples of Democratic/liberal think tanks were the Brookings Institute and Center for American Progress, while Republican/conservative think tanks were the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Cato Institute. Coders were also asked if any individual was shown to be countering 'liberalism' in the article. If so, coders were asked to use the aforementioned categories in describing that person.

Coders were asked to determine if the term liberal was associated with any of the following twelve attributes, first created by Smith (1990) in his examination of liberal and conservative trends in the United States since World War II: reformism, democratic beliefs, libertarianism, regulatory and interventionism, centralist beliefs, humanitarianism, egalitarianism, permissiveness, internationalism, multinationalism, nonmilitarism, and prodénte beliefs. If there was an association between the liberalism and an attribute, coders were asked to code for the valence of the attribute itself (positive, negative, both positive and negative, neither). Coders were also asked if the attribute was associated with a person or group, political party, ideology, social program, economics or 'other' in the article. If the attribute was associated with a person, coders followed the same aforementioned categorizations used above.

Analysis Techniques

All of the data was analyzed through numerical and statistical measures of frequencies, trends and associations. Examining frequencies was necessary in order to measure the relative

importance of specific variables in relation to each other. Evaluating these frequencies over the entire sample period gave a broader, historical understanding of the strength these variables may or may not possess over time. Finally, examining the data through associations between variables and newspapers made it possible to evaluate whether the variables measured differed among media outlets – a finding which would suggest that the alternative press do indeed offer a unique perspective for its readers.

Results

In total, 17,824 articles were qualified for inclusion in this study (i.e. had the root-word “liberal” in the headline or first paragraph and were indexed in one of the 12 years studied for all 8 publications: 2,943 *Chicago Tribune*; 2,325 *New York Times*; 4,925 *Los Angeles Times*; 3,091 *Wall Street Journal*; 880 *The Nation*; 1,453 *National Review*; 912 *Newsweek*; 1,275 *U.S. News & World Report*). Using the random sampling method described above, 586 articles were examined. Given that the goal of 4 articles in each sample year was not always attainable, particularly in the first two years of the study, eighty-one articles were examined from *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*, 163 articles were from the *National Review* and *The Nation*, and 342 articles were from the four newspapers (*Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*). Thus, on average 40.5 articles were examined from each predominate newsmagazine, 81.5 from every ideologically-focused magazine and 85.5 articles from each newspaper.

The Cohen’s kappa measure of agreement between the two coders was 77.02 percent for all variables. Values of kappa greater than .75 indicate excellent agreement beyond chance alone and suggest a strong standard measure of reliability (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998). *Scott’s Pi* was computed at .61, representing the inter-coder agreement after chance has been removed. The *Scott’s Pi* test depends on basic probability theory and calculates the “chance agreement” based on the proportion of times any particular value of a category is used (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998). This test is extremely important in gauging the veracity of results between coders and the result here suggests a reliable coding scheme was utilized.

Liberalism was coded as neither positive nor negative (58.9 percent) in the majority of articles examined. However, thirty percent of articles presented liberalism negatively while only 7.8 percent of articles presented liberalism in a positive light. Roughly three percent of articles presented liberalism in both a positive and negative manner. Therefore, Hypothesis 1, which stated liberalism will be less likely to be framed positively than negatively in media coverage was supported.

The second hypothesis stated that liberalism will be statistically less likely to be associated with the positive attributes (humanitarian, egalitarian, democratic) than the negative attributes (regulatory and interventionist, permissiveness, prodénte, multinationalism, and centralism) in media content. In testing this hypothesis, significance was ascertained through three statistical measures: chi square p values; measures of associations, such as the Phi coefficient; and adjusted residual scores, or the difference between expected and observed counts that can demonstrate actual effects of this relationship. The Phi coefficient is useful as it indicates the reduction in prediction error that is obtained when one table factor is used to predict the other, suggesting if any found significance is also important to the population. This measure of association also minimizes the influence of the sample size and degrees of freedom – important benefits when a large sample size, such as this one, is employed (SPSS, 1999). It indicates the strength or weakness of an apparent association along a 0 to +1 scale, with 1 indicating a perfectly significant relationship that is also large in the population. Taken in total, “Cramer’s V and chi-square make it possible to distinguish between a small but nonetheless real association between two variables in a population and an association that is both significant and relatively more important” (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 167).

There was a statistically significant relationship between liberalism and the negative attribute of regulation (50.5 percent, $p < .0005$). In examining these nominal variables, the phi coefficient ($\phi = .650$), appeared to validate the found association in the larger population. Regulation was the most common attribute associated with liberalism. If the remaining attributes are divided into three ten-percentile categories, all of the attributes that were found in 20 to 30 percent of article content were found to be statistically significant. They were the positive attributes of humanitarianism (25.9 percent, $p < .0005$, $\phi = .481$) and egalitarianism (25.8 percent, $p = .004$, $\phi = .296$), and the negative

attributes of centrist beliefs (22.4 percent, $p = .007$, $\phi = .305$), multinationalism (21.9 percent, $p = .021$, $\phi = .385$), and permissiveness (21.0 percent, $p = .026$, $\phi = .274$). All of the attributes viewed as neither positive nor negative encompassed the total second ten-percentile category ranging from 10 to 20 percent of article content. While not statistically significant, the attributes were internationalism (19.8 percent), libertarianism (19.8), reformism (18.3 percent), and nonmilitarianism (14.2 percent). The rarely associated attributes, ranging from 0 to 10 percent of article content were democratic beliefs (9.9 percent), and the negative attribute, prodénte beliefs (6.3 percent).

In total, 4 of the 6 attributes that were found in more than 20 percent of article content were negative attributes. Thus, hypothesis 2, which stated that liberalism will be significantly less likely to be associated with the positive attributes (humanitarian, egalitarian, democratic) than the negative attributes (regulatory and interventionist, permissiveness, prodénte beliefs, multinationalism, and centralist beliefs) in media content, was supported.

The third hypothesis stated that the ideologically-conservative magazine, *National Review*, as well as the generally perceived conservative newsmagazine, *U.S. News & World Report*, will be significantly less likely than *Newsweek*, and *The Nation* to frame liberalism and its associated “positive” attributes positively.

There was not a significant relationship found between the valence of liberal and all magazine content ($p = .081$). The relationship between predominant newsmagazines and liberal valence ($p = .049$) was found to be significant, while the relationship between ideologically-focused magazines and liberal valence was not significant ($p = .145$).

Strong effects of a particular case of one variable on a particular case of another variable were found if not more than 20% of the cells have expected values less than 5. Adjusted residuals were examined to determine the difference between the observed count for a particular cell and its expected count. Values well below -2 or above $+2$ identified cells that departed markedly from the model of independence, suggesting a particular direction in a relationship that could not be expected by chance alone.

One would expect *Newsweek* (-2.1) to refer to liberalism more positively than it did while *U.S. News & World Report* referred to liberalism more positively than would be expected by chance alone (2.1). While the relationship between ideologically-focused magazines was not found to be significant, it was interesting to see that *National Review* (2.2) referred to liberalism more negatively than would be expected by chance alone, while *The Nation* (-2.2) did not refer to liberalism as negatively as one would expect. All other publications presented liberalism within expected ranges of chance.

Therefore, in examining the publication and the valence of liberalism itself, Hypothesis 3 was only partially supported. *The Nation* was more likely to be positive about liberalism than *National Review*. However, *U.S. News and World Report* (traditionally viewed as more conservative) was more positive about liberalism than would be expected by chance alone while *Newsweek* (traditionally viewed as more liberal) presented liberalism more negatively than would be expected. This is counter to what was hypothesized.

There were no significant relationships between any of the 12 attributes and the two predominant newsmagazines, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*. However, there was a significant relationship between the negative attribute, permissiveness and ideological magazines ($p = .036$, $\phi = .436$). The conservative magazine, *National Review*, was less likely to present permissiveness (-2.1) positively while *The Nation* (2.1) was more likely to present permissiveness positively than would be expected by chance alone.

Given these mixed findings, Hypothesis 3, which stated that the ideologically-conservative magazine, *National Review*, as well as the generally perceived conservative newsmagazine, *U.S. News & World Report*, will be significantly less likely than *Newsweek*, and *The Nation* to frame liberalism and its associated “positive” attributes positively, was only partially supported.

The fourth hypothesis suggested that, due to the “norm of objectivity,” newspaper editorials and newspaper articles will be significantly less likely to frame liberalism and its associated attributes positively or negatively than to frame liberalism as “neither positive nor negative” or “both positive and negative”. The relationship between newspapers and the valence of liberal was found to be

significant ($p = .001$). When examining the adjusted residuals of each individual relationship between publication type and liberal valence, it was discovered that the *Chicago Tribune* (4.3) referred to liberalism more positively than would be expected by chance alone. *The Los Angeles Times* referred to liberalism as “neither positive nor negative” more than would be expected by chance alone. The *Wall Street Journal* (2.1) referred to liberalism more negatively than would be expected by chance alone.

There was a highly significant relationship between the type of newspaper content (editorial vs. news) and the valence of liberalism ($p < .0005$, $\phi = .314$). In examining adjusted residuals, it appears that editorial columnists (4.2) referred to liberalism more negatively than would be expected by chance alone, while news reporters (-4.2) did not refer to liberalism as negatively as one would expect. Demonstrating the journalistic norm of objectivity, news reporters (5.6) were more likely to present liberalism as neither positive nor negative than would be expected by chance alone.

In examining the relationships between the valence of “positive” attributes and publication in newspaper content, there was a significant relationship found between newspapers and regulation ($p = .031$, $\phi = .318$), where the *Wall Street Journal* (2.7) presented regulation more negatively than would be expected by chance alone and the *Los Angeles Times* (-2.1) did not present regulation as “neither positive nor negative” as much as would be expected. There was also a significant relationship between newspapers and the positive attribute, egalitarianism ($p = .024$, $\phi = .504$). Again, the *Wall Street Journal* (-2.1) presented egalitarianism positively less likely than would be expected by chance alone. *The New York Times* (3.3) referred to egalitarianism as “neither positive nor negative” more than would be expected while *The Chicago Tribune* (-2.2) did so less than would be expected by chance alone.

Therefore, Hypothesis 4, which stated that, due to the “norm of objectivity,” newspaper editorials and newspaper articles will be significantly less likely to frame liberalism and its associated attributes positively or negatively than to frame liberalism as “neither positive nor negative” or “both positive and negative”, was not supported.

Hypothesis 5 stated that Republican/conservative political organizations and governmental representatives will be significantly less likely than Democratic/liberal political organizations and governmental representatives to frame liberalism and “positive” liberal attributes positively. In exploring the data, the term liberal was found to be most likely to be associated with an ideology (36.7 percent) or with a person (32.9 percent). Only rarely was the term associated with a political party (12.5 percent), social program (.7 percent) or economics (14.3 percent). It was associated with something other than the categories listed in 14.3 percent of article content.

Fifty-five percent of associations between liberalism and a person were attributed to editorial columnists or newspaper reporters. This means that the majority liberal mentions were associated with the author of the article rather than quote or attribution from an outside person. However, of the associations made between liberalism and a person outside of the individual who authored the article, 33 percent were with a Republican/conservative governmental representative (compared with only 7 percent with a Democratic/liberal governmental representative). Almost all of the articles did not present any counter position to liberalism regardless of the valence assigned to the term (97 percent).

There were significant relationships between the valence of an attribute and the person who mentioned that attribute in 5 of 12 possible associations: the negative attributes of regulation ($p = .005$, $\phi = .453$) and centralist beliefs ($p = .044$, $\phi = .505$), the positive attribute of humanitarianism ($p = .037$, $\phi = .495$), and the neutral attributes of nonmilitarism ($p = .001$, $\phi = .800$) and internationalism ($p < .0005$, $\phi = .670$).

Adjusted residuals suggested that members of the Democratic/liberal political organizations (3.5) referred to regulation positively more often than would be expected by chance alone and unknown/unstated politically-affiliated persons (-3.3) referred to regulation positively less often than would be expected by chance alone. Democratic/liberal governmental representatives (2.4) also referred to centralist beliefs positively more often than would be expected by chance alone while Republican/conservative government representatives (-2.4) and news reporters (-2.1) referred to centralism positively less often than would be expected.

Adjusted residuals also found that Democratic/liberal government representatives (2.2) referred to humanitarianism positively more often than would be expected by chance alone while members of Republican/conservative government representatives (-2.2), and representatives from Republican/conservative think tanks (-2.5) referred to humanitarianism positively less often than would be expected by chance alone. It was also discovered that members of the Democratic/liberal political organizations (2.1) and unknown/unstated politically-affiliated persons (2.4) referred to nonmilitarism positively more often than would be expected by chance alone and Republican/conservative governmental representatives (-2.6) and editorial columnists (-2.1) referred to nonmilitarism positively less often than would be expected by chance alone.

Republican/conservative governmental representatives (2.0) referred to internationalism positively more often than would be expected by chance alone while members of Democratic/liberal political organizations (-3.3), members of Republican/conservative political organizations (-2.3), unknown/unstated politically affiliated government representatives (-2.4), and other politically-affiliated persons (-2.3) referred to internationalism positively less often than would be expected.

Hypothesis 5 stated that Republican/conservative political organizations and governmental representatives will be significantly less likely than Democratic/liberal political organizations and governmental representatives to frame liberalism and “positive” liberal attributes positively. While the results found here partially support the hypothesis, the findings were not monolithic across all attributes. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was only partially supported.

Hypothesis 6 stated that media coverage of liberalism will be statistically less likely to portrayed increasingly positive than increasingly negative over the 24-year sample period. Sheer mention of liberalism peaked in 1988 and has been steadily decreasing every since. In 1978, there were an average of 51.375 articles in media content with the root-word “liberal” in the headline or lead paragraph and by 1988 that number peaked to 283.50. In 2002, the number of articles with liberal in the headline or lead paragraph had steadily declined to 167.75 (Figure 1)

There was not a significant relationship between liberal valence and year of publication ($p = .240$). However, when looking at individual associations, it is interesting to note that 1978 (2.1) and

1980 (3.1) were the only years (out of the 12 years sampled) that referred to liberalism more positively than would be expected by chance alone (Figure 2). Conversely, from 1996 to 2002, the final years of time studied, there were fewer positive mentions of the term liberal than would be expected by chance alone (1996 = -4.1, 1998 = -2.0, 2000 = -2.2, 2002 = -2.0).

There was also not a significant relationship between the year of publication and valence assigned to any of the 12 attributes measured for the study. However, in 2002, the final year examined, all of the “positive” attributes were not referred to positively as many times as would be expected by chance alone (humanitarianism, -3.2, egalitarianism, -2.1, and democratic, -2.8). While interesting, this clearly does not indicate a trend. Hypothesis 6, which stated that media coverage of liberalism and of “positive” liberal attributes will be significantly less likely to be portrayed increasingly positive than increasingly negative over the 24-year sample period, was not supported.

Discussion

In general, liberalism was presented more negatively than positively in media content. This denigration of the term has continued to persist during the sample period studied here regardless of the fact that roughly half of Americans vote with the Democratic party; there have been no marked changes in party loyalty to either the Democratic, Republican or Independent party in the last twenty years; and America as a whole has generally moved toward a more liberal ideology.

There was a significant relationship between liberalism and publication type, but there was not a significant relationship between the attributes associated with liberalism and media type. Traditionally conservative publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The National Review* did refer to liberalism more negatively, but so did *Newsweek*. Further, *U.S. News & World Report* actually referred to liberalism more positively than would be expected by chance alone. The discrepancy between the generally-accepted political ideology of the two predominant magazines and their treatment of the term liberal may be due to the nature of magazines, in relation to newspapers. While newspapers may feel a responsibility to adhere to the norm of objectivity (although this study did not bear this out), newsmagazines may be more likely to prod their readers

with more challenging perspectives. Clearly, more study that compares newsmagazines to newspapers on this and other specific topics would be beneficial.

While it is clear that liberalism is denigrated in the press, the origins of this disparagement and the continual lack of regard for liberalism in the media remain unclear after the completion of this research and require further study. The twelve attributes first suggested by Smith (1990) that were historically associated with liberalism, were divided into “positive,” “negative” and “neither positive nor negative.” This research found that during the last 24 years, liberalism has been more likely to be associated with the “negative” attributes (regulatory and interventionist, permissiveness, prodénte beliefs, multinationalism and centralist beliefs) than the positive attributes (humanitarian, egalitarian, and democratic beliefs). Thus, it may be that through the repeated negative associations (and the lack of positive associations) with the term over nearly a quarter of a century, liberalism itself is seen as negative by association. The most likely association with liberalism was regulation. Certainly, if a political party is principally viewed in terms of bureaucracy and management, it does not seem it would be likely to engender a passionate following.

However, while these attributes were negatively associated with liberalism, there was not a clear significant relationship between all of the attributes and the specific publication. Certainly, examples were available in expected areas: *The National Review* presented permissiveness more negatively than *The Nation*, for example. However, not all “positive” attributes were presented positively in *The Nation* and not all “negative” attributes were presented negatively in *The National Review* – and certainly not to any degree that would be viewed as significant. Perhaps the 12 attributes and their proposed association with liberalism should be studied further. It could be that these 12 attributes no longer hold the same salience for liberalism and thus may not be as helpful in understanding liberalism as a whole.

When a perspective was clearly an editorial opinion, it was much more likely to be conservative, rather than liberal in terms of how the author judged liberalism itself. This is contrary to the widely-held belief that the media is “liberal.” This finding may also help explain where public opinion on this topic is derived. As Watts et. al. (1999) argue, the public may be taking their cues

from elite media workers when creating their perceptions of a “liberal” press. The findings of this study appear to support the notion that editorial columnists may be driving public perception of liberalism itself and not simply the concept of a liberal media.

Reporters appeared to be more value neutral but appeared to refer to liberalism positively more than one would expect. *The Wall Street Journal* in particular referred to liberalism more negatively than would be expected, while *The Chicago Tribune* referred to liberalism more positively than would be expected. These mixed findings certainly challenge the “norm of objectivity” presumed in the press. These findings also challenge the fact that media workers tend to be more liberal (Perloff, 1998). It may be that editorial writers feel a strong insecurity about being charged as “liberal” and therefore swing their ideology further right when writing opinions. Perhaps previous studies asking for the political ideology of media workers might consider reconfiguring the question and ask for the perceived political ideology of what is actually written by these media workers.

Republican/conservative governmental representatives had far more access in articles with the root-word “liberal” in the headline or lead paragraph. Democrat/liberal governmental representatives were three times less likely to be in these articles and to associate with the term liberalism itself. While common understanding is that the Democratic party is more liberal than the Republican party, Democrats apparently did not want to be associated with the term. This may be to an active “distancing” on the part of the Democratic party. However, it may also be due to the relationships forged between reporters and Republican representatives in particular, rather than a biased ideology in the newsrooms. Further study involving in-depth interviews with reporters and the reasons they selected the sources that they did would provide interesting insight.

When significant relationships were found between an attribute and the originating source, Democratic representatives predictably referred to attributes positively while Republican representatives referred to attributes negatively. However, all relationships were not found to be significant and in some cases Democrats were less likely than Republicans to be positive about certain attributes, such as permissiveness, prodénte beliefs and multinationalism – all “negative” attributes. This could be due to the political ‘distance’ that Democrats want to create between what

are seen as more “negative” attributes of their party. However, again, these findings were not monolithic.

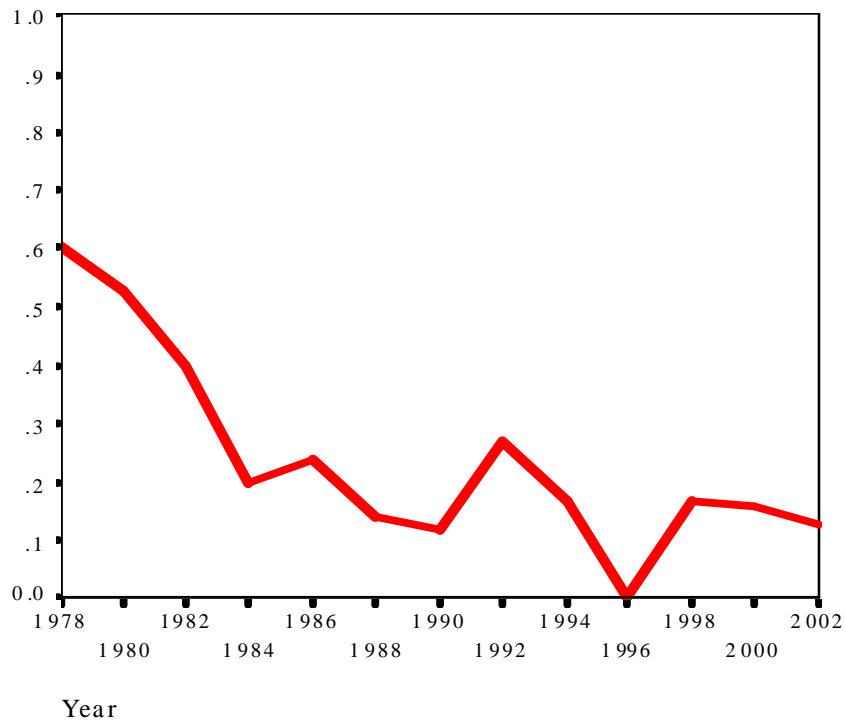
It was found that there was a peak in liberal coverage in 1988. This is not surprising given that it was a Presidential election year and Democrats were putting forth a strong challenge to an eight-year Republican reign. However, there was not a significant relationship between the valence of liberalism or the attributes used to describe liberalism and time of publication. Yet, when looking at individual associations, it is interesting to note that 1978 and 1980 were the only years that referred to liberalism more positively than would be expected by chance alone. Conversely, from 1996 to 2002, the final years of time studied, there were fewer positive mentions of the term liberal than would be expected by chance alone. The same preliminary evidence was found in regards to liberal attributes. In 2002, the final year examined, all of the “positive” attributes were not referred to positively as many times as would be expected by chance. Further, the sheer number of articles referring to liberalism in the headline or first paragraph of a story has been steadily declining since 1988. While this clearly does not indicate a trend, it certainly merits further study. Further study should include a longer time frame before Reagan took office – a period that is widely seen as one that ushered in a new phase of conservatism in America.

Figure 1



Figure 2

Valence of Liberalism



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